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# What Are the Great Christmas Stories and Why

*By FREDERIC TABER COOPER.*

I WISH that every reader whose eye has been caught by the above title would stop right there for a few minutes and do a little hard thinking to try and recall, through all the intervening years, just what was his or her earliest personal impression of the meaning of Christmas. Perhaps that first memory is of a wonderful stocking bulging with mystery; perhaps a fairy tree aglow with shimmering light; perhaps just a confused sense of the beatitude of opening countless beribboned little packages. But in any case that earliest impression is a personal experience, something you have lived through, not something you have read. To the normal happy child Christmas is rightfully the most wonderful day in the year; and accordingly there is nothing surprising to find that really great Christmas stories are well-nigh the rarest stories that there are. A story that can catch and adequately mirror back something of the inimitable color and light and pent up excitement of impressionable childhood's greatest day is one of the little miracles of narrative art.

Probably to most of the older generation the earliest recollection of Christmas in word and picture is a happy blend of gay colored cards and calendars and bright Christmas annuals resplendent with holly and mistletoe, and robins caroling blithely on bare branches amid a flurry of snowflakes. The traditional English Christmas figured much more largely a few decades ago both in picture and in text than it does to-day; gay coated huntsmen galloping after a pack in full cry; majestic Yule logs blazing grandly on ample hearths; prodigious plum puddings borne proudly in by mine host; these are the themes which still recall to us, as they did to Washington Irving a century ago, "the pictures his fancy used to draw in the May morning of life," bringing with them "the flowers of those honest days of yore in which, perhaps. . . . the world was more home bred, social and joyous than at present."

Dickens, of course, was literary high priest of the old fashioned English Christmas, and his "Christmas Carol" is beyond question the most ubiquitously known of all Christmas stories wherever the English language is spoken. It is a unique blend of allegory, satire and realism; of mediaeval miracle play, mid-Victorian merrymaking and the perennial essence of the Christmas spirit, peace and good will. It is pleasant to be told, in these days when Dickens is sadly out of fashion, that there is still a healthy demand for the "Christmas Carol" in the children's departments of our big public libraries.

Of all American contributions to Christmas literature the long established favorite is undoubtedly that familiar story in verse, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," by Clement C. Moore. Never before or since has the traditional Santa Claus, fat, jolly and rosy cheeked, with his huge overflowing pack of toys, his sleigh and prancing team of nimble reindeer, been so flawlessly embodied in a jingle of words that sings itself into the memory as enduringly as the best of "Mother Goose." The boy or girl who has never read "'Twas the night before Christmas" with a willing credulity never peeped out from darkened windows upon snow clad roofs, hoping against hope to hear the tinkle of fairy sleigh bells and to see the antlered team dashing merrily over eaves and rafters, has been robbed of one of the precious prerogatives of childhood.

Another quite charming Christmas story in rime, now almost forgotten, was "Annie's and Willie's Prayer," written, if memory is not at fault, by Dr. E. P. Rogers, in the early 70's, and beginning, like its forerunner, with the words, "'Twas the night before Christmas." The widowed father, lonely and harassed, has sent the children to bed in tears, because of his denial of the existence of a Santa Claus or of any hope of Christmas presents. Later, repenting of his harshness, he climbs the stairs just in time to overhear their naive prayers for forgiveness of his lack of faith, coupled with an ample list of the gifts they want Santa Claus to bring them, beginning with

"a nice little sled,
With bright shining runners, and all painted red."

He promptly pays a belated visit to a neighborhood toy shop, fully determined, however, to confess his own part in the surprise. But he is effectually checkmated the next morning when the children joyously show their presents as tangible evidence of the reality of Santa Claus. It is a wise and tender little poem, which some publisher would do well to reissue in appropriate dress.

II.

Of the oldest Christmas story of all, the Bible story, there are, of course, many versions both in prose and verse. Among the poems that every child is popularly supposed to know are Phillips Brooks' "Little Town of Bethlehem," Longfellow's "The Three Kings" and Eugene Field's "Three Kings of Cologne." Of a similarly religious quality are a number of legends that in one form or another have been handed down in the folklore of most of the countries of Europe. Probably the most familiar is the legend of St. Christopher, as Englished by William Caxton, which tells how this Canaanite giant, ambitious to serve the greatest Prince in the world, entered the service of one mighty ruler after another, including the devil himself—and leaves the latter to serve One mightier still, the Infant Christ, whom he bears on his shoulders across a river, thus earning his name of Christopher, the Christ Bearer.

Almost equally well known is the "Legend of the Christmas Rose"; but Selma Lagerlof has given us an unfamiliar Scandinavian version with numerous new details. It tells how Robber Father, a noted outlaw, lived with his family in Robber's Cave, up in Goinge Forest; and how one day Robber Mother, with her brood, "worse than a pack of wolves," invaded the treasured garden of pious Abbot Hans, who in those days presided over Ovid Cloister. When the monks, after a battle royal, had failed to eject the invaders, the gentle old Abbot talked kindly with Robber Mother, who scornfully told him that his beautiful garden was worth nothing at all compared with the great Goinge Forest, which on every Christmas Eve is transformed into a celestial glory of bloom, to commemorate the hour of the Lord's birth. The Abbot, much impressed by her story, makes a bargain with her, that if she will show him Goinge Forest on Christmas Eve he will intercede with the Ruler of the country and obtain a pardon for her outlawed husband. And when he carries this tale to the Ruler, the latter, though he scoffs, does indeed promise a free pardon in exchange for a single flower from this miraculous garden. On Christmas Eve, Abbot Hans goes to Robber Mother as agreed, taking with him only one lay brother, a man of little faith. And when the great miracle takes place and the Abbot is filled with the ineffable joy of a nearness of things celestial such as he had never dared to hope, the poor blundering lay brother, believing the whole wonderful scene to be the work of evil spirits, attempts to exorcise them; whereupon instantly the lights fade, the flowers wither, the whole glorious vision vanishes, leaving the gentle old Abbot prone on the ground, clutching in his lifeless hand a shriveled bulb, dug up in the death struggle by his cramping fingers. This bulb, planted with pious care, blooms a year later on the next Christmas Eve with wonderful white Christmas roses, fragrant with the fragrance of all flowers in one. And when one of these roses is carried to the scoffing Ruler, he repents of his doubts and grants the promised pardon to Robber Father.

The various published collections of Christmas stories differ widely in their contents; but the one choice that they all seem to agree upon is "The Fir Tree," by Hans Christian Andersen. The story of this little tree with big ambitions dreaming on its native hillside of growing straight and tall and some day becoming a mast on some stout vessel, and proudly visiting the furthest countries in the world, is a subtle allegory of life, the deeper meaning of which most children will miss. Real life, the little tree learns, is very different from dreams and ambitions; for it is cut down early, has its brief hour of glory one Christmas Eve in a blaze of color and tinsel and lighted candles, and then it is cast out to the obscurity of a barn loft, and ends pitifully upon a wood pile—but up to the last it guards upon its topmost branch the talisman of a golden star. But whether a child quite grasps or not the symbolism of that Guiding Star of Faith, held fast through adversity and defeat, what he will get from this story is that rare gift, which only the best of fabulists possess, of whimsically anthropomorphising birds and beasts and plants just far enough to gain a picturesque and often droll effect from their very physical differences. Only a writer with a perfect understanding of child psychology would have had the happy flash of inspiration to say of the little Fir Tree that "he thought until he had bark-ache with longing—and bark-aches with trees are as bad as headaches with us."

A story which just misses real bigness, and which has more than a touch of the above named qualities, is "Jimmy Scarecrow's Christmas," by Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman. It is a fantastic tale of an unhappy wooden scarecrow, spending his first winter in the midst of desolate cornstubble, and of how little Betsy, in spite of her happiness over her Christmas presents, feels so sorry for Jimmy that she secretly steals out, wraps him up snugly in one of Aunt Hannah's crazy quilts, and slips her new baby doll into the ragged pocket of Jimmy's coat. When Santa Claus happens along a little later, the whole proceeding tickles the old fellow's fancy so mightily that he then and there decides that Jimmy is the very scarecrow he has been looking for to take back home with him and scare off explorers from discovering the North Pole—which, as any one will agree, is a much more dignified life job than scaring crows. Incidentally, he takes the baby doll and the crazy quilt along with Jimmy, admitting that the quilt is probably "quite harmless even if it is crazy." But a year later when he brings them both back Aunt Hannah's quilt is no longer crazy, for all the squares have been carefully matched; and Betsy's baby doll is a year older and can say "Mamma" and "Papa."

III.

Probably few admirers of William Dean Howells are aware that he once wrote a whimsical story entitled, "Christmas Every Day." It tells of a little girl who was so greedy for presents and holidays that she wrote a letter to the fairies begging to have Christmas every day in the year. At first it was delightful to wake up every morning to find her stocking "all lumpy with packages of candy and oranges and grapes and pocketbooks and rubber balls," and to have the doorbell ringing all day long, with messengers leaving heaps upon heaps of presents. But by the end of the first week all the family were sick from eating too many sweets and "so many people had lost their tempers that you could pick up lost tempers anywhere." So it went on and on, and it was Christmas on St. Valentine's and Washington's Birthday, "and it didn't even stop the First of April, though everything was counterfeit that day, and that was some little relief. With Christmas turkey every day, real

*Continued on Following Page.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS